

Shakespeare's Use of the Revenge Convention

by Mirial J. Gainer

Understanding Shakespeare's use of the revenge convention necessitates first understanding Elizabethan attitudes toward revenge and the elements involved in the convention. That Shakespeare reshaped and molded revenge elements will then be clear.

Elizabethans well understood revenge, having practiced it in some form at least from the time of the Angles and the Saxons. Eventually, laws and religious beliefs greatly modified their practice. Redress was to be made by the State. However, when justice could not be so obtained, it was possible to rectify matters by personal means. The Elizabethans accepted personal revenge as long as it was swift and honorable. Deceit and intrigue made personal revenge a crime. Improper motive for revenge also placed the revenger in a criminal light. These beliefs and attitudes were applied to revenge on stage as well as to revenge in real life. Shakespeare and other dramatists thus made their revengers acceptable to their audience.

Elizabethans had numerous plays given for their pleasure on the theme of revenge before Shakespeare offered his contributions. Kyd and his *Spanish Tragedy* which in turn was influenced by Senecan tragedy had the greatest impact or influence on Shakespeare.

Kyd presented the tragedy of blood-revenge. In this type of tragedy, audience interest was primarily in the events which led to revenge being necessary for a murder, and then in the revenger's accomplishment of his vow for revenge. The catastrophe in the tragedy must be caused by the revenge. Bowers (1966, pp. 71-73) lists

what he considers the basic Kydian formula as exemplified in *The Spanish Tragedy* :

1. The fundamental motive for tragic action is revenge. Revenge is by a father for murder of his son and extends not only to murderers but also to their innocent kindred. The revenger is usually aided by an accomplice.
2. Revenge is called forth by the successful revenge, for a supposed injury, of the villains on the son.
3. The ghost of the slain person witnesses the revenge.
4. There is justifiable hesitation by the revenger, who requires much proof and the failure of legal recourse.
5. Madness is evident in the revenger.
6. Intrigue is used against as well as by the revenger.
7. The action is bloody with deaths scattered through the play.
8. The contrast and enforcement of the main situation are achieved through parallels with other characters and/or events.
9. The accomplices on both sides are killed.
10. The villain is an almost complete Machiavellian, full of villainous devices and without scruples.
11. Revenge is accomplished terribly, fittingly, with irony and deceit.
12. Among minor characteristics are the wearing of black; the melancholy of the revenger who struggles with problems of revenge, fortune, justice, and death: and the reading of a book before a philosophical soliloquy.

Eventually, the scope of revenge was broadened, making a

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greater variation of the theme possible. Bowers (pp. 64-65) describes this broader type of tragedy.

In the broader general type of the tragedy of revenge the catastrophe is brought about by a human or divine revenge for an unrighted wrong. The workings towards this revenge need not necessarily constitute the main plot, which may, instead, be concerned with developing the tragic situation which induces the revenge. Revenge, however, must be concerned in the catastrophe. . . . To this generalized statement may be added an abstract of character. The revenge may be conceived either by a hero or by a villain, who may be either protagonist or antagonist. The reason for revenge may range from blood-revenge to jealousy, resentment of injury or insult (real or fancied), or self-preservation. The revenge must be carried out by the revenger himself or his interested accomplices. . . . When guilty the opponents of the revenger are usually killed or disgraced, and even the innocent do not always escape death. The revenger and his agents may fall at the moment of success, and sometimes even during the course of the vengeance. If the revenger is a villain he is always killed. Intrigue is customarily resorted to by one side or both sides ; and since the revenge is serious, deaths are numerous and often bloody and horrible. Ghosts of the injured dead may appear to urge on the revenge or utter forebodings, and free use may be made of horrors. In extreme cases the interest through most of the play may be concentrated on the accumulation of various villainies and intrigues which at the last arouse the catastrophe revenge.

With the influence of Seneca and Kyd found on every hand, Shakespeare began to work on his own plays using the revenge

convention. *Hamlet* and *Titus Andronicus* follow closely the Senecan-Kydian tragedy of revenge. The reasons for revenge used in these plays were well-known by the Elizabethans. For Hamlet it was the revenge of his father's death; for Titus, the revenge of the deaths of his sons and the ruin of his daughter. However, the revengers themselves were quite different. In *Hamlet* the protagonist was a hero-revenger. On the other hand, Titus was the villain-revenger. Shakespeare reshaped the conception of revenge for his own purposes. With Hamlet the action revolved around the concept of revenge. However, of primary importance was the character of Hamlet himself, not the action of the play. Shakespeare depicted a hero faced with a moral issue well-known by Elizabethans. He was more interested in how Hamlet would deal with the issue than in the revenge itself. The action was, then, a by-product of the character development which filled the interval between the call to revenge and its accomplishment. Hamlet changes from a melancholy, idealistic student who receives the command for revenge but is unable to accomplish it quickly, to a man who realizes vengeance belongs to God and turns its ultimate fulfillment over to Him (Ribner, 1966). His intrigue against Claudius and his killing of others necessitates his own death. He is redeemed both by his submission to God and by his death. He never loses the sympathy or the interest of the audience through his struggles.

Titus Andronicus, however, presented quite a different aspect of Shakespeare's revenge. Dramatic variation called for another type of revenger. Titus could not be considered as a hero, for he achieves his revenge through dishonorable means. And since blood-revenge was, on the whole, considered evil by Elizabethans, in Titus evil finds free expression.

From the beginning Titus is depicted as proud and blinded to true justice. It is his misconception of justice and right which ushers in the need for revenge, first by Tamora and then by Titus himself. He

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offers Tamora's son as a sacrifice which incites her wrath. In her revenge two of Titus' sons are killed and his daughter is ruined. Titus becomes more villainous and ultimately has his revenge. His death is necessary since he is a villain. The audience cannot sympathize with him as they did with Hamlet. Evil must be overcome. Shakespeare used more Senecan elements in depicting the revenge tragedy of Titus. Blood, horror, and sensationalism are prevalent. The concept of such a revenger-villain itself is Senecan as well. However, Shakespeare did not use all elements of any particular revenge tragedy, Senecan or otherwise. Rather, he chose only those which would make his plays successfully carry out his ideas.

Shakespeare also drew from the broader scope of revenge tragedy, making good use of Elizabethan ideas of revenge. Since the play no longer required the workings toward revenge as the main plot, another plot could be substituted as the main plot, thus introducing a wider range of subject matter and play structure. Also, other reasons for revenge, as ambition, envy, resentment of injury or insult (real or imagined) and jealousy, could be developed in conjunction with revenge. Three plays using the revenge convention in a broader sense are *Macbeth*, *Richard III*, and *Othello*. In each play the protagonist begins well enough, but is soon put into situations which lead ultimately to revenge and doom. Macbeth and Richard both are portrayed as courageous soldiers. However, ambition swiftly gains their hearts. Shakespeare then shows the corruption of his characters by their succumbing to ambitious goals. That their ambitions corrupt them is clear in their actions. Macbeth leaves himself open to the revenge of Fleance and Macduff by killing members of their families. For Macbeth, the supernatural is used as forewarning both to his success and to his downfall. Similarly, Richard murders innocent people, thereby causing revenge to fall upon him through Richmond. The use of the supernatural in Richard's case foretells his fall. In both instances Shakespeare takes two men who could

have been heroes and makes them into villains instead by their bloody deeds. The possibility of revenge hangs over them. For them to receive their just deserts, a revenger then comes forth. Revenge in both plays has been used in quite a different way than before. Revenge and its elements are secondary to the main plot. The character studied is no longer the revenger, but rather the one who receives the revenge of another.

Othello fits neither of the two categories previously discussed, if indeed they can be labelled categories. In *Othello* revenge permeates the complete play. Iago sets the stage for revenge by his imagined injury received from Othello: Cassio was placed in a position which Iago felt he himself deserved. Here, then, is the villain-antagonist-revenger. Most of the play revolves on Iago's accomplishment of his revenge. The other portion of the play involves the deterioration of Othello's character. Through Iago's intrigue, Othello becomes jealous of Desdemona, and discord is wrought between Othello and Brabantio. Othello becomes a villain-revenger when he avenges himself of his wife's supposed infidelity. In *Othello* Shakespeare shows the criminal aspects of revenge. Since both Iago and Othello are criminal in their revenge, both must die in the end: Othello redeemed through repentance, Iago doomed through unrepented villainy.

Shakespeare did not use the revenge convention of Kyd and Seneca merely as a form to be followed rigidly. Rather, he borrowed different portions, changed them as he saw necessary, and thereby created unique tragedies of revenge. Even in a romantic tragedy as *Romeo and Juliet*, he allowed a portion of the revenge convention for effect. The blood-feud between the Capulet and Montague families found its ultimate resolution in the death of the lovers. Shakespeare knew what was appealing to his audience and what could be used for best effect. That Shakespeare could use the revenge convention effectly in such different plays merely points

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again to his great genius.

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Shakespeare reshaped and molded the different elements of the revenge convention with which the Elizabethans were very familiar. That he could do so effectively to delight audiences continuously through the years merely points again to his great genius. This paper seeks to look at the elements of the revenge convention of Elizabethan England and to consider how Shakespeare used those elements in particular tragedies.